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THE INFORMATION INSTRUMENT OF STATECRAFT
IN A "GLOBALIZED" WORLD

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHARACTERISTICS, STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESESS.....	2
IMPLICATIONS FOR UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY	7
CONCLUSION	9
SOURCES CONSULTED	11

THE INFORMATION INSTRUMENT OF STATECRAFT IN A "GLOBALIZED" WORLD

Introduction

The world is in the midst of an information revolution brought on by dizzying advances in computer and telecommunications technology. This information explosion is drawing societies closer together to the point that anyone with a computer, modem, and telephone can communicate with distant societies in a matter of minutes. Instant availability of information from around the globe presents new opportunities and challenges for American statecraft and for the instruments of policy.

Information is more than raw data. For information to be useable it must be managed—processed into something recognizable and useful for decision-making (knowledge). In the context of state-to-state and public diplomacy, knowledge is packaged and communicated between state and non-state actors as a means to achieve US foreign policy objectives. Knowledge and the means to communicate that knowledge are the critical attributes of information as an instrument of statecraft.¹

This paper will focus on how the information instrument of statecraft stands out as a powerful tool and critical component of state-to-state and public diplomacy. It will highlight characteristics of the information instrument of policy, strengths and weaknesses of the instrument and implications for American foreign policy.

¹ Col Edward Mann, USAF, "Desert Storm," *Airpower*, vol VIII, no 4, (Winter 1994) 9

Characteristics, Strengths and Weaknesses

Several distinguishing features set the information instrument of American foreign policy apart from more traditional definitions of information and flag it as a powerful tool of statecraft. Each characteristic has associated strengths and weaknesses that help determine how the instrument may be most effectively applied.

A key characteristic of the information instrument of statecraft is its global reach. Modern communication media such as the Internet, interactive television and satellite-based communications shrinks time and geography and facilitates communication between states and societies. A strength of this characteristic is that information can be transmitted anywhere on earth in minutes. In 1994 for example, the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Mexico used the Internet to draw attention to their cause when President Salinas revoked land rights of peasants in Chiapas Mexico in order to secure the North American Free Trade Agreement.² The Zapatistas launched an intensive Internet campaign to solicit support and counsel for their cause from the global community. Their effort drew considerable attention to the plight of the people of Chiapas, became a significant issue for debate in the Mexican Congress³ and spawned permanent World Wide Web pages.⁴ The Zapatista's use of the Internet highlights the effectiveness of the global reach of information power. The Zapatistas not only proved the utility of the Internet for people-to-people and government-to-people contact, they proved that the technology is not restricted to the wealthy. A

² Harry M. Cleaver, Jr., "The Zapatista Effect: The Internet and the Rise of Alternative Political Fabric," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2, (Spring 1998), 622-625

³ Ibid, 634

⁴ Ibid, 629

potential weakness of this aspect of the information instrument is that even though tools such as the Internet are inexpensive to use, many societies still cannot afford or desire them.⁵ An additional weakness of this characteristic is the sheer volume of information available over media such as the Internet. Sorting and processing information will be a challenge for practitioners of state-to-state and public diplomacy.

Another critical attribute of the information instrument of policy is the capability to selectively target audiences. The US may communicate tailored messages to developing nations, countries moving toward democracy, societies interested in free trade or to people in need of humanitarian aid. This flexibility is a significant strength of the information instrument as a tool of American foreign policy. Vehicles such as the Internet, Voice of America (VOA) radio, student exchange programs and aid missions permit the US to develop information packages tailored to advance national interests, goals and objectives and to meet the needs of the target country. If for example, the United States Information Service (USIS) determines that the target audience has access to computers with modems, they may make heavy use of the USIS World Wide Web site to disseminate information. The Internet may be used in conjunction with printed media and hands-on exchange programs to achieve information program objectives. This method was part of the USIS FY98 strategy in Indonesia to acquaint selected non-governmental organizations and businesses with US corporate initiatives to integrate economic growth with environmental protection.⁶ One shortcoming of a

⁵ Robert Koehane and Joseph S. Ney, Jr., "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 5, (September/October 1998), 82

⁶ United States Information Agency, *FY98 Indonesian Country Plan*, August 1997, Goal/Project5

strategy of selectively targeting audiences is that the media may not be available to achieve program objectives. Budget cuts that have reduced the amount of printed material⁷ available and the fact that more than "three-fourths of the world's population does not own a telephone, much less a modem and computer,"⁸ reduces the opportunity for tailoring information programs to specific audiences. Worldwide media such as VOA radio may be the only means available to reach some societies.

Information is resistant to closed societies. Although it may be difficult to fine-tune messages to some audiences, it is nearly impossible for closed societies to isolate their populations from the free flow of information. This is a huge advantage of the information instrument of American foreign policy. Even though China has been successful in blocking much of the communications into their country, media such as Radio Free Asia (RFA) have been able to cut through Chinese jamming efforts. This is important for US foreign policy, for although the Chinese are hostile to uncensored information, they are attracted to the prospect of economic development and open markets.⁹ RFA allows the US to pursue its interest in fostering an open economy in China by providing a platform to share American expertise in economics and open market operations with the Chinese people. However, this narrow means of communication may also be a significant shortcoming, since there is no guarantee that a message transmitted over a single source like AM radio will be received by the target audience (business and society leaders). Additionally, messages transmitted using AM signals will fall far short of the

⁷ Walter Laqueur, "Save Public Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol 73, no 5, (September/October 1994), 23-24

⁸ Robert Keohane and Joseph S Nye, Jr, "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age," *Foreign Affairs*, vol 77, no 5, (September/October 1998), 82

⁹ Steven Forbes, "Strong Signal," *Forbes*, 13 January 1997, 25-26

detail and clarity that may be achieved through the Internet or face-to-face exchange programs.

The information instrument is a force multiplier of state and public diplomacy. Since the Persian Gulf War, the US Government has begun to see the value of information as a force multiplier¹⁰ for diplomatic efforts around the world. Advances in information technology, progress toward a global economy and the realization by some formerly closed societies that resistance to the free flow of information is futile, presents the US with opportunities to employ information power to shape the international environment and pursue national interests. The US is the world leader in information technology. From communications and navigation satellites to the convergence of computer and telecommunications capabilities, America dominates the information environment. Richard Holbrooke and his negotiating team used real-time satellite imagery, computer aided mapping capability and virtual reality imaging to influence all parties in the Bosnian entanglement. He proved that the US could monitor the activity of participants in the conflict and verify compliance with a negotiated settlement.¹¹ This was a huge strength of the force multiplication effect of the information instrument. Holbrooke used information to leverage his skill as a negotiator, speed the negotiation process and ultimately bring about a settlement in the Balkans. Despite the success of using information as a force multiplier in Bosnia, one

¹⁰ Joseph S Nye, Jr and Admiral William A Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, vol 75, no 2, (March/April 1996), 20-22

¹¹ See Warren Bass, "The Triage of Dayton," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no 5, (September/October 1998), 95-97 and Joseph S Nye, Jr and Admiral William A Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, vol 75, no 2, (March/April 1996), 32

weakness of this approach may threaten future applications. The risk of misinterpreting information is a potential shortcoming of using the information instrument to enhance diplomacy. This could be particularly damaging to US credibility if a diplomatic case is built on inaccurate or false information. An adversary could create false information by manipulating original transmissions or by creating new messages that may damage US diplomatic initiatives. Computer-based communications such as the Internet and electronic message systems are particularly vulnerable.¹² The US Government must protect information from this real threat of political terrorism.

The information instrument is being used as a force multiplier in public diplomacy by US agencies such as USAID and USIA in their efforts to help build economies, foster cultural exchange, promote democracy and foster goodwill toward the US. In Zimbabwe, USAID and USIS sponsor economic trade centers, African American conferences and seminars on business franchises in the US. Internet access featuring the USIS Web site and around-the-clock CNN broadcasts are available wherever these sessions are held. Even though the focus of these initiatives is largely on economic development, a heavy dose of American values and ideas are provided in the background and serve as a force multiplier for promoting US interests, sharing culture and achieving US regional goals and objectives.¹³ This example demonstrates the versatility of the information instrument of policy and highlights a strength of employing it as a force multiplier of public diplomacy.

¹² See Daniel F. Burton, Jr., "The Brave New World," *Foreign Policy*, September 1997, 34, and Martin Libicki, "The Emerging Primacy of Information," *Orbis*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 273-274.

¹³ Col Herbert Chinongo and Elinah Chinongo, interview by author, written, Washington, DC, 4 September 1998.

Implications for United States Foreign Policy

Key tenets of United States National Security Strategy are engagement and employing the tools of statecraft to influence actors in the international system.¹⁴ The information instrument of policy is critical to America's ability to engage and shape the political environment and should be woven into all forms of diplomacy. In this setting, Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," where national power is based more on the persuasiveness of information than on coercion¹⁵ will become a key player. For instance, it could provide the means to encourage China to expand its participation in free market competition. Tools of the information instrument such as RFA and the Internet should be used to nurture economic and free market principles among influential business and society leaders in China. People-to-people contacts should be integrated with US Government diplomatic initiatives to entice the Chinese Government to open doors to fresh ideas and business practices. These initiatives are key to advancing the US strategic priority of fostering a strong and stable Asian Pacific community. US information programs, tailored to Chinese audiences, should focus on encouraging them to follow the lead of Mikhail Gorbachev, who realized over a decade ago that the Soviet economy could not move forward unless information was allowed to flow freely.¹⁶

¹⁴ US President, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, (Washington, DC The White House May 1997).

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¹⁵ Robert Koehane and Joseph S Nye, Jr. "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age," *Foreign Affairs*, vol 77, no 5, (September/October 1998), 86

¹⁶ Joseph S Nye, Jr and Admiral William A Owens, "America's Information Edge" *Foreign Affairs*, vol 75, no 2, (March/April 1996), 29

The US Government should use the information instrument to help international organizations to relieve global suffering. Initiatives like those in Rwanda, where the US provided satellite imagery and terrain maps to the United Nations "ReliefWeb" Internet site to help the UN provide humanitarian aid to the Rwandan people, should continue.¹⁷ The US should employ the information instrument of policy to promote democracy and present a favorable American image. For example, USIA should continue programs to strengthen democratic institutions like teaching English (the language of the Internet, business and globalization) to the people of developing nations.¹⁸ These programs help promote international goodwill toward the US and cooperation in the international community.

One of the tremendous advantages of the information instrument is how quickly mobilized information power is developed. In minutes, the US can generate a press release to the world on any topic or publish the US position on global terrorism on US Embassy Web sites. During the Persian Gulf War, President Bush recognized the instant impact of information power when he used CNN to announce to the 26 members of the coalition that the war would continue after Saddam Hussein tried to float a phony peace settlement. Since the US has an extensive information infrastructure, mobilizing information power is a fast and relatively inexpensive tool of statecraft.

Moral considerations play heavily when applying the information instrument to American foreign policy. The US is postured to lead in an information-intensive

¹⁷ "Relief Web," (United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed 2 September 1998), available from <http://www.reliefweb.int>, Internet

¹⁸ Steven Monblatt, interview by author, written, Washington, DC, 26 August 1998

environment, but preserving the lead will depend on how successful the US is in creating an environment where other nations come to trust American information and rely on it to make their own national security decisions.¹⁹ This relationship is what Joseph Nye refers to as the "information umbrella."²⁰ Analogous to the "nuclear umbrella," the US would be the ultimate source of information for aligned nations who would in turn be likely to work with the US. This arrangement will be the key to coalition leadership and should provide a mechanism for natural alliances in time of crises, as long as the information provided by the US is accurate and credible. Considering the global reach of information, the US has a moral obligation to ensure that information is consistently truthful and accurate.

To preserve the integrity of US information programs, adequate security of the information environment should be a high priority for the Department of Defense, Department of State and USIA. These agencies should join forces to protect the operating environment from terrorists, hackers and others with a malicious intent and the capability to destroy and disrupt US information programs. Protecting communications systems and information program strategies will be a key element in preserving the credibility of the information instrument of statecraft.

Conclusion

As the world prepares to round the corner to the 21st century, time and distance are being overcome by rapid advances in information technology and societies are

¹⁹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and Admiral William A. Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 2, (March/April 1996), 26-27

²⁰ *Ibid*, 26

drawing closer together—connected in cyberspace. This new world order will present challenges for American statecraft and the information instrument of policy.

Information will continue to be the key element that mobilizes all other instruments of policy and national power. It will play a particularly critical role as the global scene shifts to greater emphasis on economic cooperation where even closed societies profess their interest in economic development and foreign investment. In this environment, soft power will become a key player in relationships between state and non-state actors.

As the international stage becomes crowded with new actors, the US must preserve the capability to set the agenda for the information environment and target information programs and messages to specific audiences in the international system. The future holds a world where the US will find it difficult to maintain a dominant position in the information environment due to rapid advances in communications technology and an abundance of information that will be impossible to control. This dynamic world situation will require America to stay engaged in the international community by using the power of information to enhance all of the tools of statecraft. Integrating the information instrument of policy with state and public diplomacy will be the key to preserving US capability to respond to the opportunities and challenges of globalization.

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